

Real Righteousness

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Date: 28 May 2006

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[0 : 00] If you could turn to page four in your Bibles, you'll find it very helpful. We're going to look at these four verses this morning. And this is the third in the series, and thank you to the choir for giving us a bit of a recap over the last two weeks.

They sang for us the Beatitudes this morning, and last week's sermon was verses 13 through 16, but I'm not going to sing that for you. I'm going to spare that.

But I do want to remind you that at the end of that passage, Jesus gave us an application. And in that application, he said, Let your light shine before people, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Now, preachers, one of the things that preachers really hope for is that you go away with the sermon thinking about how that applies to your life.

How does it influence your life in the week to come, starting tomorrow? And I hope that you went away last Sunday thinking, How can I let my light shine brightly?

[1 : 07] Very simply, that's the hope that I have. At our home right now, we're in the stage of family life where there are lots of toys around. In fact, every room seems to be devoted to playing with toys.

And many of those toys require batteries as well. And so if headlights or flashlights grow dim, or there is a sudden lack of vitality in the toy, there's this urgent search for what's wrong with it. And the first place that we look and our son looks is for the battery. You know, is it connected right? Or maybe is it dead?

And of course, things aren't right until the light is bright again, or there's life in that toy again as well. And I think that, in a way, this passage that we read, these four verses, are a lot like those toys. We should, in the same way, be on a search to find out how our lights can shine brightly, especially if they are dim in the world, especially if there is a lack of vitality and life as well.

[2 : 21] How do we do that in a world that is largely ignoring God, is dark towards God? Well, this passage, these little four verses, tell us how this is done.

How we let our light shine brightly. And it doesn't give us sort of five ways to do that. What it does is it points us to the source of our light.

And really, the end of that passage last week is saying that our lights are reflected lights, that the source is in Jesus Christ himself. And that's why, in verse 17, Jesus points to himself, having followed up verse 16.

And he says this, he says, Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. And this was something that was probably a criticism that was leveled against Jesus at that time.

Certainly, Jesus spent a lot of time with unclean people, with sinners and tax collectors. Certainly, he healed on the Sabbath. He was somebody who did not follow the purification rules exactly.

[3 : 33] And he was crucified because he was, the accusation was that he was a lawbreaker. But he says here, I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law and the prophets.

And that's an extraordinary thing to say because that word fulfill literally means to bring about that which has been promised.

It's about bringing to completion, to fullness, the thing that has gone before. And so Jesus is saying that the law and the prophets, in fact, the whole Old Testament, point to him.

They are about him. And he completes all that is written in the Old Testament. In fact, the way that he's putting it is that he fills the Old Testament.

As Jesus puts it, they are, the Old Testament scriptures are a testimony to Jesus Christ. And he is bringing into being that which is promised.

[4 : 36] And there's two examples of this I want to give. Because you might not see it right away. In the law, and you know, when people become Christians, and you're sharing about how to grow in faith, you'll talk about reading the Bible.

And many people will want to read the whole Bible cover to cover. And you'll sort of warn, well, you know, watch out for getting bogged down by the law. But Jesus is saying the law is pointing to him. And for example, in the law we see a very detailed system of animal sacrifice. And it's very gruesome in some ways. And what's happening is that offerings and sacrifices are being made on behalf of the people in order to purify the people, in order to make them right with God again. That's what atonement is. That has to be repeated over and over again. But listen to what the book of Hebrews says. And this really says it well about the connection of the Old Testament with the New Testament.

It says this, For if the sprinkling of defiled person with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify you, your consciences, from dead works to serve the living God?

[6 : 02] You see what's happening here is in the Old Testament we see the sacrificial system and we realize that that's pointing to Jesus, who will be the one perfect sufficient sacrifice, who purifies us forever by the forgiveness of sins, by shedding his blood, the blood of God, on the cross.

In a way it's a shocking thing, but it's something that shows the fulfillment and completion of the law. The law also talks a lot about relationships between one another and God and our love for God that's required of us.

And of course Jesus fulfills this again by making manifest to us the love of God by dying on the cross for us. And 1 John says, In this is love that we have, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.

And he sent his Son to die for us. And then we love because he loved us first. You see, he's revealing God's love. He's pouring it into our life that we might love one another as the law requires. So you see that the law is the expression of God's character and his will. And wonderfully, Jesus completely fills the law because he is God and he perfectly obeys God's will.

[7 : 29] And that's why if you look at verse 18, Jesus says that not even the smallest part of the law, and he talks about an iota and a dot, which are the smallest parts, smallest little pieces of Hebrew markings, nothing will pass away until heaven and earth pass away.

And what he's saying there is that all of the Old Testament, all of the Bible, is God's word. We cannot ignore even the smallest part of it because it is permeated with Jesus himself.

It is God speaking to us and testifying about Jesus. One of the very helpful things about the Bible studies that are happening in the church, and especially right now we're studying Mark in Central Focus, and I know a number of small groups are studying it as well, is that part of the study is devoted to showing the Old Testament connection to the passage that we're studying.

And when you do that, you do that work and see about how the roots of what is being talked about, about what Jesus is saying and doing, is in the Old Testament, the passage comes alive.

And you see the powerful work of God through all time to bring about our salvation. It's showing us that God's word is active in the Old Testament now today.

[8 : 54] But some of you know about an infamous teacher named Marcion who lived around a hundred years after Christ. And his big mission was to teach that the Old Testament God was incompatible with Jesus Christ.

Completely different values, different kind of God. And so what he did was create a Bible that cut out the Old Testament, which he said was useless, and cut out any part of the New Testament that was too closely tied with the Old Testament.

And so he did a lot of cutting and no pasting. And what you see is a pretty small Bible that he says is the true Bible.

Now of course he was a heretic. And we must be careful of that kind of work ourselves where we make Bibles that are cutting out parts of it because it doesn't seem incompatible with our sensibilities.

We must be careful about not treating the whole Bible as God's Word. And especially as Christians we need to understand that the Old Testament is critical to our understanding of Jesus Christ.

[10:06] And Jesus himself would have none of that kind of cutting. He says in verse 19 that the one who relaxes one of the least of these commandments, and by relax he means to loosen its hold on our consciences, to loosen our hold on its authority, in our life.

The one who relaxes these will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, and the one who does them and teaches them will be called great, he says. And you see here he's saying that the Word of God, all of it, the Old Testament, is God's Word, and that there is greatness and there is reward that comes from obeying his voice and telling others to do the same.

And I think that's one of the crucial things of what we're doing here at church when we're gathering on Sunday, when we're gathering in our small groups as well, is that we encourage one another to obey the voice of God, to obey all of God's Word as Jesus teaches it to us.

It's one of the gifts that we have in the church. And the reason it's a gift is because we're getting at what makes us bright lights in the world.

And that is the obedience of our lives to God Himself and His Word. Now I was not a very good math student and one of the things I had trouble with was something called corollaries.

[11:33] In fact, I'm probably getting it wrong, but there's a corollary here that's really important for us. And he's really saying here that the degree of our obedience to God is equal to the degree of our brightness in the world.

That the way in which we follow Jesus Christ is how bright we will shine in the world. They are tightly connected, closely connected.

Often I have a conversation with people, especially if they are new Christians, that will talk about how they are intimidated by others in the church. And what they are saying is that I feel inadequate in church at times because there are many people who know the Bible better than I do.

There are many people who understand theology much more than I do. They have a lot of learning about the Christian faith. But I tell them, you know, the mark of Christian maturity actually has nothing to do with that.

Because what God is looking for is not how much you know about the Bible, how much you know about theology, but how good are you at obeying what you do know?

[12:48] How faithful are you at following God's words that you have understood and that you do know? You know that we live in a culture that worships success.

Well, Jesus says here's what true success is. Here's what it means to be great. It is to be obedient ones, those who obey the word of God in their lives.

These are the ones who will shine brightly. These are the ones that are great, Jesus says. And you know, Jesus goes even further than that in the last verse, verse 20.

And he says this, he says, For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, and by the word exceed, he means, unless it's far greater than the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Well, that's a shocking thing to hear. It's intimidating, to say the least. These are people, the scribes and Pharisees, who are very good at being righteous. You know, the scribes were the ones who worked out the details of the law.

[13:58] How could you put it into practice every day? And they would argue endlessly about things like, can you move a lamp from one room to another on the Sabbath? Is that considered work?

Can you lift your child on the Sabbath? Isn't that a burden in work? And so they work out a system to be able to look as though you are completely keeping the law.

And they are actually looking at the detailed limits of keeping it. Now the Pharisees were the ones who attempted to carry it all out. They were lay people. They weren't ordained, and their names meant separated ones.

And they had an interesting job. They were separated from the ordinary activities of life, the normal vocations that people had, simply so that they could keep all the rules and regulations of the law. And so it was their full-time job to live a righteous life. Full-time. I don't know what they did on their vacations, but this is what their life was about.

[15:01] And so you ask yourself when you see this verse, who can enter the kingdom? If the professionals can't do it, what can I do? Well, thankfully, we know that Jesus was talking about a different kind of righteousness.

He was talking about a righteousness of the heart. And the reason we know that is because Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees.

And he said in Matthew 23, something that's very instructive for this verse. And Jesus didn't mince words. You'll hear, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.

Well, that'll really turn them on to listen. He says, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

It's a very vivid picture, isn't it? It's a picture of people who look very godly on the outside, beautifully godly. And yet inside, they are dead spiritually, and they are full of hidden sin.

[16:09] And he's saying that they are very good at keeping the letter of the law, and yet their hearts are far away from God. So what Jesus is saying here is that he is about looking into the heart.

And that is something that we must be careful of as Christians. You know, this is a warning about the scribes and Pharisees to us as well, especially the longer that we've been converted. Because it's very easy to be satisfied with looking the part of a good Christian, of going to church, of going to Bible study, of serving God, and knowing our theology.

But we must always look at the heart. We can do those things and have hearts that are far away from God. What we are called to do here in this verse, and I think that this verse pushes us to us, it is to have a spiritual EKG on our heart condition.

What does it look like? Well, that is the goodness of verse 20. You know, as shocking as it is, it does make us look into our hearts, and it actually drives us into the arms of Jesus.

It pushes us to look for God's grace and seek his kingdom. It reveals to us that we truly are poor in spirit, and we actually need a righteousness that is not our own.

[17:29] We need a righteousness that is actually a gift from God. Well, that is exactly what God in his mercy gives to us in Jesus Christ. This is the gift of the gospel, and it's actually a fulfillment of what the Old Testament teaches us.

In Ezekiel 37, God promises this. He says this, he says, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you, and what will happen?

I will cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. The gift of the Holy Spirit, giving us a new heart. And then Jeremiah says, this is the covenant which I will make, declares the Lord.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And so you see here how Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets.

He does give us a new heart, a living heart, and he actually writes his laws on our hearts. And it really is a heart that really takes joy in obeying the voice of God.

[18:49] He makes us know God personally as our Heavenly Father. That's the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. It's really appropriate that today on the Sunday of Ascension, and then next Sunday on Pentecost, we are hearing colics and readings that have to do with the Holy Spirit.

Because it is God's powerful work through him that gives us a heart transplant. At church committee on Wednesday, we talked about the fact that just before the Sermon on the Mount and afterwards, there are accounts of Jesus healing people very powerfully in a powerful way.

And of course, our righteousness comes because God heals our hearts, makes them whole, and writes his laws upon them by his power. And I want to close by saying that there's a real challenge in this passage for us.

Because what Jesus is calling us to is a radical obedience to his commandments so that we will shine brightly in the world. And the only way it will happen, he says, is by seeking his grace so that we might be transformed.

It's really a daily call for us for God to soften our hearts, for him to write his laws in our hearts daily. We need God the Holy Spirit to give to us what we cannot do for ourselves.

[20:13] So what does that transformation look like? That softening of our heart, that radical obedience that Jesus gives to us by moving us to live for him and his commandments?

Well, there's a couple of examples. It means that in the ethics of our workplace, for example, that we go from rationalizing those gray areas of what is right and what is wrong and figuring out how can it be smoothed out to actually thinking about what does God really want in this situation?

How can I be faithful to him? how can I glorify him in this decision before me? That is so difficult. In regard to our money and our time given for God's work, without a transformed heart, we might ask, well, how much do I have to give to not feel guilty, to be acceptable?

A transformed heart says, how can I arrange things to give more? And in fact, in the New Testament, there is an openness to much more than just 10%. Some people gave everything they had.

But the key was a cheerful giving because of a heart that is transformed to keeping God's commandments. With regard to our sexual relationships, you know, we go in a transformed heart from saying, how can I keep things hidden?

[21 : 37] To thinking, what are all the ways that I can be faithful with regard to sexuality? How can I use my sexuality for God's glory? glory so that I mirror his faithfulness and his purity towards us, which is what the intention of it is.

That is what a heart transplant does. And finally, with regard to gossip, you know, a heart transplant goes from saying, how can I put people in my power and tear them down, to saying, how much can I build somebody up behind their back for the sake of strengthening the body of Christ?

That's what radical obedience is. That's what a heart with God's law written on it looks like. And the wonderful result of this obedience will mean bright lights.

That's what it means when we follow God in a radical way. Our lights brighten in the world. And that's why Jesus will be calling his followers in the rest of this chapter to go far beyond the law and to be actually more radical in the way that they live out their lives for him.

And so we end by knowing that we need God's grace, very simply. And we ask God to grant us his Holy Spirit to move us to obey him.

[23 : 00] We ask that God will give us new hearts that loves what he loves and that wills what he wills. So by his grace, let your light shine before others that they may indeed see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Amen.